

# The Spirit of the Age

by G. Campbell Morgan

---

*The sermon highlights the danger of having a 'form of godliness' but denying the power, and the need for a deeper relationship with God through inward cleansing and spiritual affinity.*

**Topics:** "The Danger of Formalism", "Spiritual Authenticity"

---

## Description

G. Campbell Morgan addresses the spiritual condition of the people during Malachi's time, emphasizing their mechanical observance of rituals while their hearts were far from God. The repeated question 'Wherein?' reflects their disbelief in the accusations of God against them, showcasing a disconnect between their outward practices and true devotion. Morgan draws parallels to the present age, warning against the danger of having a form of godliness while denying its power, highlighting the need for genuine spiritual transformation rather than mere ritualistic adherence. He stresses that the decline in spiritual understanding stems from a corrupt priesthood that fails to embody and teach the true covenant of God. Ultimately, he calls for a return to authentic relationship with God, urging believers to seek a deeper, transformative faith.

---

## Transcript

We come now to the consideration of the condition of the people at the time when Malachi uttered his prophecy. There is a keyword in the book revealing this condition, a word these people used in reply to every message which the prophet delivered to them, showing what their real attitude was. It is the word "Wherein." Let us consider the seven occasions of its use: -

(1) Mal 1:2. - "I have loved you, saith the Lord. Yet ye say. Wherein hast Thou loved us?"

(2) Mal 1:6. - "A son honoreth his father, and a servant his master: if then I be a Father, where is Mine honor? and if I be a Master, where is My fear? saith the Lord of Hosts unto you, O priests, that despise My name. And ye say. Wherein have we despised Thy name?"

(3) Mal 1:7. - "Ye offer polluted bread upon Mine altar. And ye say, Wherein have we polluted Thee?"

(4) Mal 2:17. - "Ye have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied Him?"

(5) Mal 3:7. - "Return unto Me, and I will return unto you, saith the Lord of Hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return?"

(6) Mal 3:8. - "Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed Me. But ye say. Wherein have we robbed Thee?"

(7) Mal 3:13 - "Your words have been stout against Me, saith the Lord, Yet ye say, Wherein have we spoken so much against Thee?"

You notice in this last instance the authorized version gives the word "What," which is a peculiar accident of translation. It is the same word in the Hebrew, and ought to have been translated "Wherein," as in the other cases.

Thus we have this word, "Wherein," put by the prophet into the mouth of those people seven distinct times, with reference to seven distinct announcements. He comes to them first of all with the declaration: "I have loved you, saith the Lord," and they say, "Wherein hast Thou loved us?" Then he says, "Ye have despised the Lord," and they say, - "Wherein have we despised Him?" And then: "Ye have polluted My altar," and they say, "Wherein have we polluted Thine altar?" And then: "Ye have wearied Me," and they say, "Wherein have we wearied Thee?" And then: "Return to Me," and they say, "Wherein shall we return?" And then: "Ye have robbed Me," and they say, "Wherein have we robbed Thee?" And lastly: "Ye have spoken against Me," and they say, "Wherein have we spoken against Thee?"

This word shows us the condition of these people in a lurid light. The temple is rebuilt, the altar is set up, the sacrifices are offered, the feasts and fasts are alike observed, and to these people - with outward form and ritual, perfect to the very last and minutest detail - the prophecy comes, the Divine complaint is made. And they look at the prophet with mingled astonishment and incredulity, and they say, "Wherein? What do you mean? You charge us with having despised God and polluted His altar, with having wearied Him, and with wandering from and refusing to return to Him, and accuse us of robbing and speaking against Him; we don't see that we have done these things, so why should we be subjected to these accusations? You come and say we despise God's work. Look at our sacrifices and offerings! You tell us that we have polluted the altar. We have brought our gifts! You tell us that we have wearied Him. We don't see where or when! We are not conscious of having done anything to displease Him! You tell us to return. We don't see where we are to return from; we don't see where we are to return to! You tell us we have robbed God. We want to know when? You say we have spoken against God. We don't remember having spoken against Him; when was it?"

What is the significance of this word "Wherein?" These people are not in open rebellion against God, nor do they deny His right to offerings, but they are laboring under the delusion, that because they have brought offerings, they have been true to Him all along. Theirs is not the language of a people throwing off a yoke and saying, "We will not be loyal," but of a people established in the temple. It is not the language of a people who say, "Let us cease to sacrifice, and worship; and let us do as we please"; but it is the language of a people who say, "We are sacrificing and worshipping to please God," and yet He says, by the mouth of His servant, "Ye have wearied Me: ye have robbed and spoken against Me."

They have been most particular and strict in outward observances, but their hearts have been far away from their ceremonials. They have been boasting themselves in their knowledge of truth, responding to that knowledge mechanically, technically; but their hearts, their lives, their characters, the inwardness of their natures, have been a perpetual contradiction in the eye of Heaven, to the will of God; and, when the prophet tells them what God thinks of them, they, with astonishment and impertinence, look into his face and say, "We don't see this at all!" To translate it into the language of the New Testament - "having the form of godliness, they deny the power." They have passed into the fearful condition of imagining that

what God asks for is but the letter, and they are failing to understand that the letter is, at best, but an awkward representation of what God is demanding in the spirit.

I say "awkward," simply because the letter never can convey all the spiritual meanings. When a man is willing to obey the letter with spiritual intent, then God has more to say than the letter can contain. These people have come simply to bear a literal yoke. They are the most orthodox people, and yet their whole heart is outside the matter, and the facts of their lives are hidden, alas! from themselves, so subtle and awful in the influence of getting away from direct and close dealing with God. I say these facts are hidden from their own eyes. They are not conscious of it, but God is changed to their conception. The God of their fathers is not their God. The God of spiritual communion with His people, who walked and talked with the patriarchs, is not their God. The god of Israel in the days of Malachi, the god whom they had invented, and were trying to appease and worship, was the god of trivialities, of mechanical observances, the god who asks for a temple with a set number of stones and corners, the altar of such a shape, and so many sacrifices and prayers, without any reference to character. When the prophet came to these people, he came to a people who were feeling thoroughly satisfied with their religious observances, and were prepared to say, "Wherein have we done this, or failed to do that?"

II

Now let us go further to discover the reason of their condition. The second chapter begins with these words: "And now, O ye priests, this commandment is for you;" and the seventh verse reads: "For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts." That is the Divine conception of the priesthood. The priest should not only have the knowledge, but should keep it, that is, walk in it, be obedient to it, be the embodiment of the knowledge he holds, of which he is the depositary for the time being. The people "should seek the law at his mouth," for he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts. More, he is to tell them the will of God, and that not simply as one who possesses it as a wonderful theory, but as one who is himself living within the realm thereof.

That is the ideal. What then has the prophet to say to the priests? (Mal 2:8): "Ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the Lord of Hosts." Now all this teaches us, that at the back of the declension of the people is the declension and corruption of the priest; that the people failed to have a right conception of God, because the priest ceased to give them the true conception. The whole company of the people have passed out of the high spiritual realm of past history, because the priest has tampered with - corrupted as the word is here - the very covenant of God.

In reading Nehemiah in connection with Malachi, you will have noticed something to which I shall ask you to refer for a moment. Neh 13:28-29 : "And one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib, the high priest, was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite: therefore I chased him from me. Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites." There you have an example, a historic statement of this very thing, the case of a priest marrying the daughter of Sanballat the Horonite.

Read the history of Nehemiah and see how much Sanballat was, or was not, in accord with the purpose of God. Sanballat was the embodiment of the spirit that was antagonistic to the Word and Spirit of God. One of the priests of God has married his daughter, and Nehemiah says with that magnificent vehemence which characterized all his splendid work: "I chased him from me." Why did you do it, Nehemiah? Why did

you chase him away? "Because he had defiled the priesthood, by defiling the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites." The same word occurs in Malachi: "Ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the Lord of Hosts." The priesthood, instead of keeping the law, had "departed out of the way." The priests had announced the law, they had read its articles, they had proclaimed it as law, and then had debased it themselves. Corruption had come into the covenant by the way of the priesthood.

What was the priesthood for? The only reason for its existence was that there should be on the human side a guarding of the articles of the covenant of God, and no man who himself corrupts, tampers with, breaks the covenant, can for a single moment, by his teaching, uphold it; and the trouble at the back of the national declension was the declension of the priesthood. The teachers of the people, the messengers of God, had themselves done despite to the law of God, by proclaiming it as fact, and denying it in their own lives.

This then was the spirit of the age. Formalism, ritual, ceremonial - everything so far as mechanical and outward observance - complete. A Divine messenger came voicing the complaint of God, and the people in astonishment and anger, and with marked impertinence, looked into the very face of high heaven and said, "We don't see this thing at all - Wherein?" And all this because God's appointed messengers have themselves, in life, and work, and conversation corrupted the covenant, and have passed into the region of baseness and contempt in the eyes of the people.

III

There is, I fear, an awful sense in which that picture is a picture of the age in which we live. Never was there a day when organizations were more complete, and outward and mechanical forms of service more numerous than they are now, but I am not going to dwell merely upon ritual.

I have made reference to a verse with which you are all familiar - 2Ti 3:1-4 : "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy. Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good. Traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God." I ask you very solemnly to read that description and apply it to the age in which we live.

Take the next verse, five, for it is that to which I wish to come: "Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof." Will you - bearing that verse in mind - turn to Paul's letter to the Romans (second chapter and the twentieth verse) [Rom 2:20], and very patiently follow the thought? You must go back for a moment to the seventeenth verse in order to catch the meaning of his words: "Thou art called a Jew - an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, which hast the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law." I have read that passage in order that we may bring these two words together. In the twentieth verse of the second chapter of Romans an (Rom 2:20) and in the fifth verse of the third chapter of second Timothy (2Ti 3:5) you have the same word "form." These are the only two occasions where that actual word occurs in the whole of the New Testament. Of course, you get the word "form" translated from other words, but this word is , and it means "formation" rather than "form." It refers to the possibility of a process rather than to a thing accomplished. When Paul said to Timothy that in these last days perilous times should come, that men would have the form of godliness and yet deny the power he marked a danger more subtle than that of ritualism. It means that in the last days men will actually come to possess the truth itself which is the

formative power of godliness, and yet will deny the power. A man may have the very formation of godliness, he may hold the truth, he may be the most orthodox man in the whole city, and yet deny the power.

That is one of the dangers of the present day. Take Christendom at large. You have thousands of people who can give you good reasons for belonging to the Church, who have some purity in their lives responding to the claims of Jesus Christ, and seem to be not only maintaining the outward forms, but appear also to hold tenaciously to the truth which is the formative power of the Church, and yet whose lives are not in correspondence to the truth they hold.

In this sense there is an element of danger in our great conventions. Do not misunderstand me. I am not undervaluing them. I thank God for the blessed work being accomplished through them, but there are men and women who are able to enunciate the whole scheme, not only of regeneration but also of sanctification, and yet in their actual life, - when lifted away from the crowd of their fellow Christians, and from the opinion of their fellow men, into the white light of Divine requirement, which alone reveals character, - it can be said of them "denying the power."

Tell such men it is not a new extension scheme, not a discussion of this constitution or that, we need, but a red-hot fire purging out the dross, and they say "Wherein? Have we not all these things? Do we not hold the truth? Are we not orthodox? - Wherein?"

What is at the back of all this? As in the old days, so now, there has been a corrupting of the priesthood, there has been a corrupting of the covenant by the teachers, who ought to have led us into the deep things of God.

What is God's covenant? If you read the eighth chapter of Hebrews in connection with the thirty-first chapter of Jeremiah, beginning with the thirty-first verse and reading on, you will find that the covenant of God with His people, for this dispensation, is in advance of the old covenant. That was a covenant in which God was married to His people, and they were to be kept by outward laws, words written upon tables of stone, commandments uttered in their hearing, and the marriage relationship was to be maintained between the chosen people and God, in that covenant, by obedience to those laws.

What is the new covenant? The new covenant is, "I will write my law upon your heart and upon your mind," and the relation of people in the new covenant to God is to be the relation of a new birth, of an actual affinity, of a marvellous identification. I am no longer married to God in the sense of maintaining the relation by obedience to an outward rule of life, but in the union of a child of God, born again in His Spirit; with His law, not given to me from the outside, but written on my mind and on my heart.

Is that covenant corrupted, nay, is not Christendom corrupted from end to end? If a man begin to talk about inward cleansing, about the necessity for the fire-blood cleansing of the nature, before men can live in communion with God, how many there are who say at once, "We are talking of things that are impossible." So long as we who teach corrupt the covenant by going back to Judaism, by lowering the high and awful requirement of actual new birth and spiritual affinity, just so long will the people be content with holding a form of truth and denying the power.

There is then an awful application of Malachi's days and the spirit of his age to this age and to these days. There was a lowering of the standard of the Divine requirement by the priest - using that word in the Divine sense of the messenger of God - and the people boasting too often in their correct theory of worship,

super-orthodox, were yet, in their inner life, in the depth of their own nature, in the actual fact of what God alone knows, "denying the power."

Let us go alone into His presence, for that is light, and fire, and life, and ceasing to be content with conventional religion let each one for himself and herself, in that awful Presence say, "O God, save me from mere correctness of view, and that curiosity to know, for the sake of knowing only, which has blighted my life, and make me what Thou wouldst have me to be in actual character."

---

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/g-campbell-morgan/the-spirit-of-the-age/>

# *Grow in Your Walk with Christ*

---

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

**[www.sermonindex.net](http://www.sermonindex.net)**